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THE NATIONAL FIRE PROTECTION/ FIRE SAFETY BUDGET

By Richard Schulte

The story of the “Great Recession” isn’t pretty. The official unemployment rate at present is near 10 percent, but the actual unemployment/under-employment rate is closer to 17 percent. Some in the ranks of the unemployed have been so for 99 weeks and Congress has been debating extending unemployment benefits for another 13 months beyond 99 weeks. Big banks have been “bailed out” since the recession began. General Motors and Chrysler have been “bailed out”. Three states, California, New York and Illinois, are near bankruptcy, if not already bankrupt, and there is talk that even the United States Government is teetering on the brink of bankruptcy.

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In the aftermath of all of these “bailouts” and concerns about state (and municipal) government bankruptcies, many both in and out of government are looking at reducing government spending as a solution to fiscal problems. There are really only two solutions to the fiscal problems which have developed in the United States-either cut spending or raise taxes (or both). It would seem that raising taxes in the midst of a deep recession would damage the economy even further than it has already been damaged, hence, it would appear that the only viable solution to our governmental fiscal problems is to reduce spending.

There are really only two solutions to the fiscal problems which have developed in the United States-either cut spending or raise taxes (or both).

Given all of the talk recently about budget cutting by government, it seems reasonable that perhaps we also need to take a look at the nation’s fire safety and fire protection budget. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), fires caused an estimated \$12.5 billion in property damage in 2009. This figure is only the direct cost of property damage due to fire.

In addition, there are costs due to the consequences of fire-business interruption, health care costs for those injured by fire, not to mention the cost of all the fire safety and fire protection measures taken to prevent or mitigate the damages caused by fire. The latter is something that is rarely, if ever, discussed, but is certainly worth some thought.

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A list of fire safety and fire protection measures which add to the total cost of fire in the United States include the following:

- Fire insurance costs
- Professional fire fighter salaries and benefits
- Fire department vehicles and equipment
- Fire station buildings (including utility costs)
- Medical care for civilian and volunteer fire fighter injuries
- Fire lane signs and markings
- Fire hydrants
- Municipal water distribution system capacity increases
- Private fire control systems (sprinkler/standpipe systems)
- Private building fire alarm systems
- Portable fire extinguishers
- Building egress facilities
- Structural fire protection
- Exit stair and elevator hoistway enclosures
- Floor opening enclosures
- Smoke management systems
- Elevator recall systems
- Egress and exit signage lighting
- Emergency/standby power systems
- Testing laboratory listing/approval
- Fire hydrant maintenance
- Private fire safety system maintenance
- Public fire safety education and training
- Fire research
- Code development
- Code training and education
- Code documents
- Fire investigations
- Fire litigation

The above is probably just the “short list” of the cost of building fire safety in the United States, but just the “short list” is long enough.

Over the years, layer-upon-layer of fire safety measures have been added. There is no doubt that these measures have been effective in reducing the impact of building fires in the United States, but in a period of time where both public and private resources are scarce, perhaps it’s time to take a look at this list and eliminate some duplication.

Based upon studies in Fresno, California, Scottsdale, Arizona and Prince George’s County, Maryland, we know that sprinkler protection is capable of reducing the number of both civilian and fire fighter fatalities and injuries which are caused by fire. We also know that sprinkler protection is a highly reliable method of providing building fire protection. Given this, it would seem that sprinkler protection can be used to reduce our national fire safety budget.

In recent years, the trade organization representing the manufacturers of passive fire protection products, the Alliance for Fire and Smoke Containment and Control (AFSCC), has argued that we should not “put all of our eggs in one basket” and rely solely on sprinklers to provide fire protection. To my knowledge, no one has ever suggested that we eliminate all other fire protection features in buildings when

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sprinkler protection is provided, however, the sprinkler protection record indicates that we should be able to remove at least a few of the layers of fire protection which have built up over the years if sprinkler protection becomes the primary means of providing fire protection for the public.

With respect to the reliability issue, it is an acknowledged fact that sprinkler systems are not 100 percent reliable, but there is no reason why the reliability of sprinkler systems cannot be increased to 98 or 99 percent if code enforcement authorities, *i.e.*, the fire service, pay more attention to the enforcing the required maintenance provisions for sprinkler system installations. From the standpoint of budgeting, it seems to make more sense to concentrate on making sprinkler protection even more reliable than assuming that these systems will fail and requiring additional passive fire protection as a backup in every building.

We know that aircraft can be manufactured reliably enough so that the number of backup systems required to safely operate these transportation devices are minimal. There is no reason why this level of reliability cannot also be achieved in the fire protection field.

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